

Patriot in Action

Raymond Weeks of Alabama Founder of America's Veterans Day

A *patriot in action* feels patriotism and also takes action to serve, to lead, to make a difference for country. She sometimes sees a wrong that needs to be corrected; sometimes, he sees something not yet done that merits commitment and energy.

Raymond Weeks served his calling of a national Veterans Day for 40 years, from his envisioned concept in 1945 until his death in 1985. He is called the "Father of Veterans Day" primarily because of action he took during 1945-1954 leading to President Eisenhower signing Veterans Day into law as a federal holiday.

On November 11, 1945, Raymond Weeks, who had returned to Birmingham after his wartime service in the U.S. Navy, observed little more than a memorial service seemed to be organized in his



Weeks presented a draft program in 1946 titled "National Veterans Day 1947" to General Dwight Eisenhower.

city on Armistice Day. He felt his state and nation needed to do more to remember and honor veterans.

The seed of a calling had been planted. Raymond Weeks had the vision to expand and enrich Armistice Day, which celebrated the ending of WW I, to honor veterans of all U.S. fought wars.

Armistice Day

Armistice Day started unofficially when World War I ended—the 11th hour of the 11th day in the 11th month of 1918. After four years of trench warfare and heavy casualties, the Allies and Germany signed an armistice. Armistice Day was officially recognized in 1926 when a congressional resolution stated:

The recurring anniversary of this date should be commemorated with thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through goodwill and mutual understanding between nations....

President Calvin Coolidge called upon officials to display the flag on government buildings and invited Americans to observe Armistice Day in schools, churches....

In 1938 (twenty years after the first unofficial celebration) Congress declared Armistice Day a legal holiday to celebrate the end of what President Woodrow Wilson called "The war to end all wars." Unfortunately, then came Hitler and ambush air attacks at Pearl Harbor bringing America into World War II, escalating the need for more military, more veterans.

National Day for All Veterans

After Weeks envisioned his concept in 1945, he planned and worked for a year to prepare and lead a delegation to join Senator John Sparkman of Alabama to petition General Dwight Eisenhower at the Pentagon for national support. On November 11, 1946, Weeks presented a draft program for the following year entitled, "National Veterans Day 1947."

That was his vision, even though he used "National Armistice Day" officially until Congress changed the name legally—he persevered nine years from 1945 until 1954. Other members of the delegation to launch the campaign with Eisenhower included Clewis Trucks, Talbot Ellis, and Bill Mitcham. They boarded a National Guard plane with Colonel W. A. Robertson of the Air National Guard to Washington, DC.

Many Americans had the idea that Armistice Day honoring WW I veterans needed to expand to include all veterans. Yet, Weeks had a bigger vision for a national program. And, he invested extraordinary time and effort in his concept, which launched a national movement. President Reagan stated decades later, Weeks was the “driving force” for America’s Veterans Day.

Weeks provided the leadership of action while Eisenhower provided the leadership of advocacy and executive approval. Some people attempt to summarize the life work of Mr. Weeks as something like, “he is the guy who changed the name of Armistice Day to Veterans Day.” History proves a description of greater service and impact is merited.

Weeks seems to have been a master with the media. Newspapers from Washington, DC, Birmingham, AL, and other cities covered the proceedings. They reported, Eisenhower cited he was scheduled to become president of Columbia University early in 1947 and “expressed regret” at not being able to attend in person the inaugural event in Birmingham. General Eisenhower committed publicly that he would assist finding “a top man” to serve as featured speaker. He did: General Omar Bradley.

The First National Veterans Day



On November 11, 1947, General Bradley served as keynote speaker for the main inaugural national event, the World Peace Banquet, held in Birmingham. Bradley was known for his distinguished military career that culminated in his command of the American armies, which “stormed” the Normandy beaches and drove 800 miles across France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and

Germany in a campaign that helped end the European war. Bradley was promoted to General of the Army (five-star), became chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and later Administrator of Veterans Affairs serving more than 18 million ex-servicemen and women.

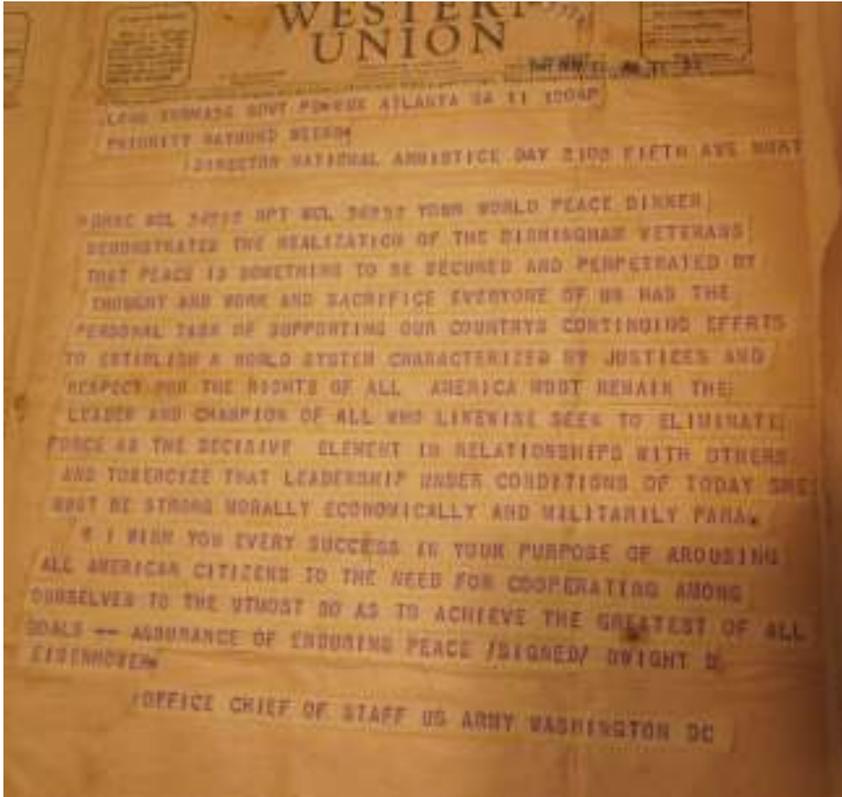
Activities in Birmingham spanned two days and included a banquet, parade, Football Classic at Legion Field, ROTC drill team competitions and awards, raising of the colors, and a dance. Weeks arranged for the flags of the United Nations to be carried in the parade by native sons of member countries or Boy Scouts. Leaders from Alabama, the U.S. government, and the military were among guests to honor veterans, celebrate, and enhance commitment to world peace.



In 1947, America still was rejoicing the end of World War II, a massive international conflict that took years and killed or injured millions of people. America responded to enter this war after surprise bombing raids at Pearl Harbor. The American government—supported by the will of the people—vowed to finish the fight to stop aggressors and protect our freedom. After years of sacrifice for victory, the American people craved peace.

Telegram from Eisenhower to Weeks

General Eisenhower sent a telegram to Raymond Weeks on November 11, 1947, stating his belief and desire that a core of the mission for Veterans Day include “world peace.”



Highlights of the telegram:

Your World Peace Dinner demonstrates...that peace is something to be secured and perpetuated by thought and work and sacrifice.... I wish you every success in your purpose of arousing all American citizens...to achieve the greatest of all goals... enduring peace.

Eisenhower recognized this was a “national” event, addressing Weeks as director of National Armistice Day (unofficially called National Veterans Day until legal in 1954).

Eisenhower Telegram Transcript

Western Union
November 11, 1947
Initiated 11:37 am; sent 12:04 pm
Priority

Raymond Weeks
Director National Armistice Day
2105 Fifth Avenue North
Birmingham, Alabama

Your World Peace Dinner demonstrates the realization of the Birmingham Veterans that peace is something to be secured and perpetuated by thought and work and sacrifice. Everyone of us has the personal task of supporting our country's continuing efforts to establish a world system characterized by justice and respect for the rights of all.

America must remain the leader and champion of all who likewise seek to eliminate force as the decisive element in relationships with others and to exercise that leadership. Under the conditions of today, she must be strong morally, economically, and militarily.

I wish you every success in your purpose of arousing all American citizens to the need for cooperating among ourselves to the utmost so as to achieve the greatest of all goals—assurance of enduring peace.

Dwight D. Eisenhower
Office, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army
Washington, DC

The historic purpose of Veterans Day is to appreciate veterans and to advance education and action toward world peace.

By 1953, Eisenhower had been elected President of the United States and met with Weeks again (this time at the White House) to renew commitment to make Veterans Day a national holiday. [Note of interest: Eisenhower ran for president opposing U.S. Senator Sparkman of Alabama, candidate for Vice President].

Seven years after Alabama organized a national celebration for veterans of all wars, President Eisenhower (home state Kansas) signed legislation proposed by Kansas Congressman Edward Rees to make Veterans Day a federal holiday in 1954.



...let us solemnly remember the sacrifices of all those who fought so valiantly, on the seas, in the air, and on foreign shores, to preserve our heritage of freedom, and let us reconsecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that their efforts shall not have been in vain.

-President Dwight Eisenhower

Alabama applauds leaders of Kansas and other cities and states who joined the movement and took action to make Veterans Day part of the fabric of America. After Birmingham hosted America's first national Veterans Day celebration in 1947, expanding the purpose and scope of Armistice Day, celebrations take place in communities across the U.S.A., including a major program in our nation's capital.



Veterans Day Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery